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ATTENTION 50 YEAR-OLDS: GET SCREENED FOR COLON CANCER

March is Colon Cancer Awareness Month

(RICHMOND, Va.)—Experience has made James Gunn a wiser man and one with some life-saving advice for men and women age 50 and older: get screened for colon cancer.

In August 2004, Gunn was diagnosed with the disease, which is found more often in men than women and more often in blacks than whites. “I never thought I’d get colon cancer,” said the 57 year-old Richmond native. “I didn’t believe it when the doctor told me. I said, ‘Why me?’”

Gunn, an African-American truck driver who doesn’t like doctors or hospitals, said he never considered having a screening test for colon cancer. So he didn’t know what was wrong when he started losing weight, had pain in his lower stomach and noticed blood in his stools.

“I thought it was my ulcer acting up,” Gunn said. However, hospital tests found the cancer, and two days later he underwent surgery to remove 12 inches of his colon. Following the operation, Gunn faced six months of chemotherapy.

Colon cancer is the third most common type of cancer among Virginians according to Virginia Department of Health (VDH) statistics. In 2002, a total of 4,058 Virginians were diagnosed with colon cancer, and 1,363 died from it. Cancer of the colon starts with the growth of polyps in the colon, also known as the bowel. Symptoms are not always evident, especially at first. But sometimes they do appear and can include:

- blood in your stools
- pain in your stomach
- bloating
- change in fecal matter, such as narrow stools
- unexplained weight loss

“Ninety percent of colon cancer cases occur in people over age 50,” said Theresa Teekah, manager of VDH’s Comprehensive Cancer Control Prevention and Control Project. “Both men and women should make it a priority to have a screening test.”

Screening helps in two ways. First, it can find polyps which can be removed before they turn into cancer. Second, it finds cancer early when it can be treated more successfully. If colon cancer is diagnosed early, the chance of surviving five years is 90 percent, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

(more)

Four screening tests are commonly available for people beginning at age 50.

- The fecal occult blood test is used to find hidden or occult blood. Your doctor can provide you with a kit and instructions on how to take a stool sample at home and return it with the kit for testing. It should be done every year.
- A flexible sigmoidoscopy should be done every five years. A slender, lighted tube is inserted through the rectum allowing your doctor to look in the lower part of your colon for any abnormality.
- A double contrast barium enema should be done every five years. This test includes an X-ray of the entire colon and can detect polyps and cancers. Follow-up testing is necessary if polyps or lesions are found.
- A colonoscopy, which allows your doctor to see the lining of your entire colon, should be done every 10 years beginning at age 50 for most people. Those at higher risk, including people with symptoms or a family or personal history of polyps, should begin screening at a younger age and may need to be tested more frequently.

You can reduce your chances of getting colon cancer by adopting a few simple health habits:

- Get screened regularly beginning at age 50
- Be physically active at least 30 minutes a day most days of the week
- Eat less red meat and more fruits and vegetables
- Maintain a healthy weight

These days, Gunn said he feels fine and is back behind the wheel of his truck “hauling a little bit of everything” and offering his hard-won wisdom to fellow Virginians who are 50 or older.

“I advise everybody to get checked,” he said.

For more information about colon cancer, visit <http://www.vahealth.org/cdpc/cancerprev>.

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